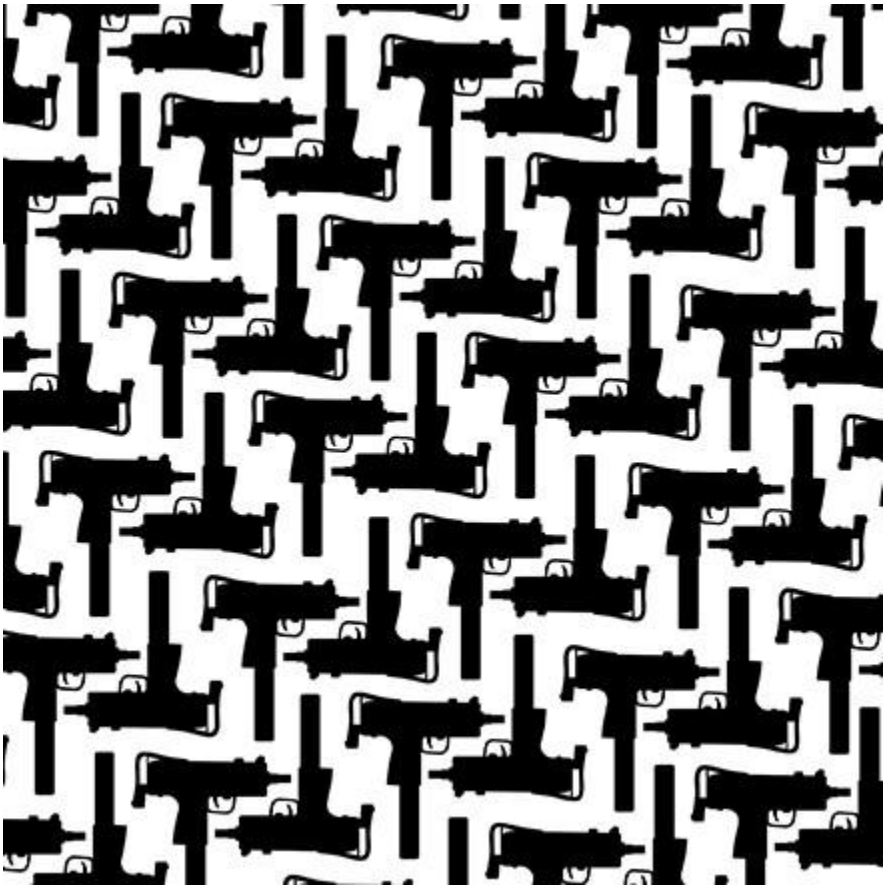
Addicted to guns

Is there a cure for Chicago's crippling dependence on firearms?

May 8, 2013 By Mick Dumke @mickeyd1971



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EDITOR'S NOTE This story is the result of a collaboration between the *Reader* and The Crime Report, the nation's most comprehensive daily source of criminal justice news and resources.

Tony Wade has always been surrounded by violence. He was raised by his grandfather in Greater Grand Crossing on Chicago's south side, a working-class area that began losing businesses, jobs, and people in the 1970s. By the time Wade was a kid, in the 1990s and early 2000s, very few weeks passed without an armed robbery or burst of gunfire in the blocks circling his home.

Wade's grandfather did what he could to keep his grandson out of trouble—he sent Wade to Catholic schools, pushed him to excel in his studies, required him to attend church on Sundays, and taught him to work in his carpet business. Wade became a talented basketball player and spent as much time as he could on the court. "I didn't really have time to run the streets," Wade says.

But it was impossible to ignore what was happening in them. Divisions and allegiances started forming even before the kids in the neighborhood around Cottage Grove and 75th hit their teens. "It was like, they was on that side of Cottage Grove, we was on this side of Cottage Grove," Wade says. "It was like a turning point when they joined a gang and they was an opposite gang to us. It started from there."

Wade attended high school at Hales Franciscan, an all-black, all-boys institution on the south side that had become a basketball powerhouse, winning state titles in 2003 and 2005. At six foot six, Wade got significant playing time as a sophomore in the 2005-2006 season, and he won a starting spot at forward as a junior and senior. His inside play attracted interest from college and junior college programs.

His future dimmed in 2008, near the end of his senior year. Wade says he always looked out for his friends, and when a group of them stole a car, Wade refused to give them up. "I was more loyal to them than I was to my family," he says. Though he received his diploma, Wade wasn't allowed to participate in graduation.

Once his days were no longer filled with school or basketball, Wade started hanging out with old friends on the block. After being so disciplined all his life, it was fun to drink, smoke pot, do some ecstasy, and make a little money selling drugs.

On the street, old alliances were shifting. Wade and his friends associated with the Gangster Disciples, in a faction they called the Evans Mob, after a neighborhood street. But some of their buddies were Vice Lords; the gang names meant less than the block where they hung out. As fights broke out over drug profits and territory, the physical space that Wade and his friends could safely occupy grew smaller and smaller. There were dozens of shootings and assaults in the blocks around his home that summer and fall. At least nine people were killed there by the end of the year.

"Certain beefs we couldn't let go," Wade recalls. "These guys come over here, you come over there, we can't go to the park, the park is on their side. So we pretty much was left to hanging on our block."

Even that wasn't always secure. "At the end of the day, I've got to protect myself. It's nothing nobody else is going to do. I've got to protect myself and mine."

Wade started carrying a gun. Despite strict city regulations, the .38 Colt revolver was easy to get from friends. It gave him a thrilling sense of power. "Basically I got addicted to the violence," he says. "Guns are very addictive, once you get in contact with them."

In parts of the city, it's far too common for lives to be shaped by the persistent threat of conflicts and the culture of resolving them with firearms. In fact, gun violence has come to seem as much a part of Chicago as the seasons. In the last 20 years, more than 12,000 people have been murdered in the city, more than 9,000 of them with firearms. Tens of thousands of others have survived being shot.

According to the numbers, progress has been made. In the early 90s crime totals in Chicago and other American cities soared, then began to drop. In 1992, Chicago logged 943 murders; 20 years later, the total dropped to 506.

Yet last year the city claimed the tragic title of the most murders in the country, for the third time in 11 years. It was little consolation that the murder rate was actually higher in a number of smaller cities—especially since the death toll in Chicago could have been much worse. On average, 47 people were wounded by shootings each week.

And then another flare-up of violence opened the new year, taking more innocent lives, generating more headlines around the world, and raising more questions about why this keeps happening—and if there's anything more that can be done to stop it.

Over the years, police, politicians, and community leaders have proposed all kinds of solutions, from banning high-powered squirt guns to bringing in the National Guard. Along with the weather—violence tends to spike during the warm months and mild stretches of winter—the size and deployment of the police force is always at the center of the discussion.

But others argue that it's time to focus on the circumstances that produce violent offenders in the first place: desperation, poverty, fear, addiction to drugs, addiction to guns. In many ways the issue boils down to whether we can afford to take the time to fight such long-standing ills, or whether we can afford not to.

- JOHN STURDY
- CeaseFire's Frederick Seaton aims to interrupt conflicts before they become crimes.

Interruption: Stopping conflicts before they become crimes

Frederick Seaton has the body and passion of a linebacker, and he's blunt in sharing his views. For one, he doesn't think much of the police explanation that most of Chicago's violence results from gang conflicts. "It's an easy out," says Seaton, a professional violence interrupter.

His colleague Marilyn Pitchford agrees: "It makes people get scared, so they can give them a 50-year sentence. They're always introducing laws, tougher sentences, but the guys doing the shootings and killings, they don't even know about them."

We're sitting in the storefront that serves as the West Humboldt Park neighborhood office for CeaseFire, a nonprofit that views violence as an epidemic that needs to be halted through networking and intervention. Like most of the frontline workers at CeaseFire, their commitment is deeply personal. After serving time for illegal gun possession and other offenses, Seaton decided to repay his community by assuring others that they don't want to spend their lives in a cell. Pitchford is moved by a painful understanding of how street conflicts can end up ripping holes in families.

For most of her childhood, Pitchford and her five siblings were lucky—by focusing on school and sports, they managed to avoid the gang conflicts that broke out regularly in their west-side neighborhoods. That changed for her youngest brother, Michael Davis. "He'd just finished football practice one day and he got robbed, stuck up, right on the corner," Pitchford says. "And cars were driving by, and people watching and seeing it, and I think that was a turning point that made him say, 'That's not going to happen again.'"

Davis "got into that street life," Pitchford says. He started using drugs. On three occasions he was wounded in shootings. Each time, he went back to his crew.

- JOHN STURDY

- CeaseFire's Marilyn Pitchford: "It needs to get to where you pull a gun and everybody's like, 'Really, dude?' It's got to be frowned upon that every time someone disagrees we've got to fight."

In 1999, when he was 24, Davis was gunned down on a West Humboldt corner known for drug dealing. Pitchford never found out exactly what happened. "At first I would drive through and just sit until somebody asked [why I was there]. But after a while, my mama said, 'Baby, leave it alone—let God do it.'"

In 13 years with CeaseFire, Pitchford has found that many of the troubled people they work with don't understand they can reach out for help. "They don't really want to be the shooters, the killers, the murderers," she says. "They want a way out, but where? What works is pulling that individual away from that crowd and all that peer pressure in their ear talking, egging it on."

Pitchford and Seaton describe how stress, substance abuse, sexual abuse, and personal disputes grow quickly into fights in neighborhoods like West Humboldt. And the fights become bloody after brothers, fathers, cousins, and friends are called in to settle them.

Ultimately, Pitchford says, the one thing that might reduce violence is a campaign to end the culture of recrimination.

"They've got to make it like the tobacco thing," she says. "It needs to get to where you pull a gun and everybody's like, 'Really, dude?' It's got to be frowned upon that every time someone disagrees we've got to fight."

In the midst of our discussion, the door swings open and in walks one of the owners of Turkey Chop, the first new restaurant in the neighborhood in years. "There's a fight," she says. "Right next door."

Two young women are beating on each other in an empty lot on the corner, and a crowd has gathered to watch. Seaton and Napoleon English, another interrupter, hurry over and separate the girls. Within a couple minutes the throng begins to disperse. As Seaton walks down the block with one of the young women, Pitchford speaks in a low, firm voice to one of the guys who'd been urging them on. Other young men return to their hangout outside a liquor store across the street, where they laugh and mimic the fight.

Pitchford tells me the incident is a good example of how things can spiral out of control. An aunt and uncle of one of the girls had been part of the crowd watching. "All she's got to say is 'Somebody else jumped on me,' then her uncles and everybody are in on it," Seaton adds. This is exactly what happened a couple of years ago, when the same aunt responded to a fight by calling on her son, who showed up with a gun and shot their foe in the head. The son is now in prison.

On the way inside, the CeaseFire workers notice a young man in a gray hoodie milling on the corner two blocks west. Seaton notes that he'd been shot just two days earlier.

"They take it as a badge of honor," Pitchford says.

The punitive approach: stiffer sentences, more jail beds

When Chicago finished 2002 with 656 murders, tops in the nation, Mayor Richard M. Daley was embarrassed, outraged, and defensive. "We're doing everything possible," he insisted. Yet the next year he sacked his police superintendent and promoted an aggressive deputy, Phil Cline, with orders to bring the body count down.

Cline did what he was told. He set up special gun teams, stepped up drug sweeps, and seized the cars of gang leaders. Most significantly, he increased the size and duties of mobile forces, deploying them in violence-prone areas to "stop anything that moves," as one officer described it to the *Chicago Tribune*.

The strategy has become standard practice in violent pockets of cities across the country. But experts say it's only effective if police work with residents and focus on serious safety threats. "Community members can have mixed feelings about these sorts of things, but if the police take advance action to communicate what they're up to, that can help considerably," says Christopher Koper, a professor at George Mason University who's conducted several studies on policing for the U.S. Department of Justice. "Maybe it comes down to who would you rather lock up, a guy with drugs on him or a guy with a gun on him?"

To many black and Latino residents, Cline's crackdowns snagged far too many regular guys along with the bad ones. Murders went down—way down, from 601 in 2003 to 451 in 2005. But relations with the community eroded dramatically. The number of homicides cleared by detectives began a steady plunge, reflecting a lack of cooperation from witnesses. In 2004 police cleared 61 percent of that year's murders; by 2012 the figure was down to just 36 percent. Cline was ousted in 2007 after a series of police abuse scandals, but the department resumed using mobile forces.

Daley's successor, Rahm Emanuel, pledged to put 1,000 new police on the street. Upon taking office in 2011, though, Emanuel saw the dismal state of the city's finances and changed his goal to putting 1,000 new officers "on the beat." To keep the promise, police superintendent Garry McCarthy had to dismantle the mobile forces.

"I am giving you the opportunity to stop before disaster happens. Once disaster happens, there is no turning back." —Sheldon Smith, of the Safer Foundation, helps ex-offenders prepare for and find work.

By most accounts, it was a disaster. That June, with shootings and murders up sharply from a year earlier, McCarthy launched his new "Violence Reduction Strategy," in which cops were asked to sign up for overtime shifts in two high-crime districts. It was a return to the mobile force strategy by another name. Killings dropped in those areas, including a 33 percent downturn in the impoverished Englewood community.

But the violence went up elsewhere, and by the end of the year aldermen in other neighborhoods were clamoring for an expansion of the initiative. It's now costing an estimated $1 million a week, and budgeted overtime funds could run out by summer.

Critics, including leaders of the police union, say the effort is unsustainable—that officers will burn out by constantly working extra shifts. McCarthy says he's not worried. "I was an overtime guy. I did a ton of overtime, and I'm still doing it."

Still, experienced cops point out that their work is based on responding to violence and won't solve any of the issues that spawn it. "It can prevent a neighborhood from getting worse if you have the right manpower and policies in place," says one veteran ranking officer. But "once the drug dealer is on the corner, it's too late for police to 'fix' the problem. All we can do at that point is chase our tail and move crime from one corner to the next."

A painful illustration of the limits of the policing strategies came on January 29. A record was set in Chicago before most residents were out of the house that morning: the warmest temperature on that date since figures were first kept in the 19th century. "May in January," the *Tribune* proclaimed. The thermometer at O'Hare hit 63 before it began falling.

That news was soon eclipsed. A few minutes before 8 AM, a 20-year-old man was shot in the head in the yard of a home on the southeast side. Just after noon, a 28-year-old man was gunned down in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood, not far from where his younger brother had been killed in 2011.

And at around 2 PM, not long after taking final exams at King high school, 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton was hanging out with friends at a nearby park when it began to rain. The park happened to be about a mile and a half from President Obama's south-side home, and Pendleton, a top student who dreamed of attending Northwestern University, had performed with the school band at Obama's inauguration a week earlier.

As the teenagers crowded under a park shelter, they were approached by a young man who suddenly pulled out a gun and began firing. Pendleton collapsed nearby with a gunshot wound in the back. She died shortly after 5 PM. It was the 42nd murder of the month.

On February 9, police arrested and charged two suspects with Pendleton's murder. McCarthy said they were Gangster Disciples who had mistakenly thought Pendleton and her friends had shot at one of them months earlier.

In the following days, Emanuel, McCarthy, and Cook County state's attorney Anita Alvarez proposed stiffer sentences for gun offenders, and the Chicago City Council increased the fines and jail time for breaking the city's gun registration rules.

Aldermen who represent high-crime areas say they support the measures because they're worth a try, though they don't get at the roots of violence. "A lot of it is that you have these communities that are very poor, times are hard, and people get desperate," said Alderman Michael Chandler, whose west-side ward, the 24th, is among the city's poorest. "The stakeholders need to bring some economic justice to our communities. Even back when Martin Luther King was staying on the west side, he was saying it would take $2 billion to turn around. He couldn't do it, and he was a much better man than I am."

Meanwhile, on April 13, officials at the Cook County jail invited reporters out to see a shipment of new beds unloaded. The jail was near capacity, they said, well before the usual peak in summer.

Another city's method: enlisting help from gang members

In April outgoing Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and police chief Charlie Beck announced that violent crime in their city had declined in the first quarter of the year, continuing a decade-long trend. Last year Los Angeles had 298 homicides, down from 647 a decade earlier and 1,092 in 1992.

It's not the result of blind luck, says Connie Rice, an LA civil rights attorney. "We've kind of enlisted the help of the gangs," she says.

In 2003 police brass asked Rice to help them formulate a new strategy for coping with LA's infamous gang violence. The effort resulted in the Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development, an initiative housed in the LA mayor's office that includes recreational programs at night in city parks, intervention with preteen youth in neighborhoods with high gang membership, and appeals to former and current gang leaders to stop retaliatory violence. There's even an experiment underway to offer the children of gang members a free college education if the kids stay out of gangs.

"If your goal is not gang eradication, which none of us knows how to do, but instead violence reduction, and you enlist the gangs as aids, then you begin to change the physics of the

neighborhood," Rice says. "We're doing it with the cooperation of the gangs because they're so powerful—they control some of the neighborhoods. We get them into classes and training, and we say, if you help us stop the violence, we're not going to hold your past against you. Everyone agrees we should keep the kids safe."

Rice says they've found that bloodshed wasn't just the result of gang identification and drug disputes, but also personal grudges and simply "the power of the barrel of a gun."

"If you don't give them a way to exert power legitimately, they'll do it another way," she says.

Though the mayor and police leadership are behind it, not everyone else is. "Some of the cops are saying, 'We don't like that you're treating the gangsters with respect,'" Rice says. "But once you create a different kind of momentum, people find it impossible to ignore."

If you can't prevent the first offense, try again

Last month, as a condition of their release from prison, two dozen recent south-side parolees gathered in a classroom at Kennedy-King College. All of them were men, mostly in their 20s or early 30s and either black or Hispanic. They sat around long tables arranged in a U, faced by officials from the U.S. attorney's office, ATF, the Cook County state's attorney's office, the Chicago Police Department, and a number of social service agencies.

Jack Tweedle, a state parole agent with a bushy mustache, addressed them first. "All of you have gun convictions in your background," he said. "Chicago is infamous all over the country for guns and murders. Now I don't want to disrespect anybody, but if all the gangbangers shot each other, would anybody give a sh*t? Maybe some moms. But the problem is that they're hitting all these innocent kids."

As a result, he wanted the ex-offenders to know that if they picked up another gun charge again, they faced the prospect of prosecution in federal court. "The sentences for federal cases are unbelievably long," Tweedle said.

Some of the offenders were sitting upright and appeared to be listening to every word. Others were looking off in the distance.

The meeting was one of about 18 a year held in violence-prone areas of Chicago as part of an initiative called Project Safe Neighborhoods. It's an example of what's known as "focused deterrence" or the "pulling levers" strategy, in which law enforcement agencies team up to pressure offenders while also offering help for those who choose a new path. "It breaks down any sense of anonymity, so they understand they're not flying under the radar," says Koper, the George Mason professor.

Project Safe Neighborhoods' obvious shortcoming is that it only reaches a fraction of the violent offenders in Chicago. Since it was launched here in 2002, about 3,500 parolees have been required to attend meetings. But about that many parolees are released from prison every year after serving time for gun-related crimes. Nearly half of all parolees return to prison.

When the police and prosecutors were done making their pitches, Tweedle let the men know that representatives from two social service agencies and the City Colleges were on hand to help them connect with school or job training.

- JOHN STURDY
- Safer Foundation's Sheldon Smith works to break the cycle of violent crime after it's started.

One of them was a 41-year-old African-American with a clean-shaven head who introduced himself as Sheldon Smith of the Safer Foundation, which helps ex-offenders prepare for and find work. "I've been in the same shoes you've been in," Smith told them. "I was somebody who tore up the west side. I was an urban terrorist."

The meeting was over in less than an hour. Afterward, about half of the ex-offenders hurried out the door. The others approached Smith and the other social service providers, asking for more information.

Smith knows firsthand that if these men don't find a productive way to live, they'll keep tearing up their communities. Both of Smith's parents worked in the criminal justice system—his father was a cop, his mother a court reporter—but he says they never had much family time. He ended up making a habit of committing armed robberies and pistol-whipping victims who didn't cooperate. At what he describes as his lowest point, he stole a car from a couple who, it turned out, were trying to get to the hospital.

"She was having contractions, and by the time 911 got there, she actually had a miscarriage," Smith says. "So that was my sticking point right there—to say, it's time for a change. Because I wanted it the easy way, and the easy way is nothing but misery. I live with that every day."

Smith was released from prison in 2005 and went to work for Safer the following year. In his view, extending prison terms for gun offenders won't do much good, simply because it won't address the plight of communities that produce them. "These guys are so hard-core, they don't know nothing else but 'You don't care for me and I've got to get what I've got to get my way,'" Smith says. "If I can

change your mind frame, I am giving you the opportunity to stop before disaster happens. Once disaster happens, there is no turning back."

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In April, a few months after he met Smith at a Project Safe Neighborhoods meeting, Tony Wade, the former high school basketball star, finished a job training course at the Safer Foundation. Dressed in a dark shirt and tie, he politely addressed members of the staff as "sir" and "ma'am" and expressed hope that he wouldn't repeat his past mistakes.

Wade says that by the end of 2008 he'd fallen into a daily routine of getting high and fighting rivals. Just a few minutes into the new year, police reported seeing him on the street "adjusting" his jacket. They found his loaded .38 Colt in his pocket.

After sitting in jail for a month, Wade was released on bond. It was only five months before he was arrested again. A police officer said Wade and a friend fled as he approached the building where they were hanging out. Both were caught with guns, the officer said, and Wade had baggies with about two grams of crack in his mouth. Wade was locked up in the county jail for nearly five months before being sent to a jail-run boot camp. But he violated the terms by leaving his home and hanging out with his friends. In July 2011, he was found guilty of both weapons charges and given concurrent sentences of two and three years in prison.

While he was locked up, Wade says he kept thinking that his grandfather is 76 and won't be around forever. "So I said, 'Maybe I have one last chance to get my life back on track.'"

Last summer he was paroled and placed on home confinement. Wade says he's trying to stay optimistic. He's found some temporary work and daydreams of someday becoming a real estate agent. But he's frustrated that he ended up here. "It's like walls are going up," he says. "So I'm trying to work on my spiritual life now. I've still got my whole life ahead of me."

He says this last point as if it were an open question.

Kaitlyn Mattson helped research this story.